

This contribution to Canadian adoption literature highlights a history of adoption practices fraught with legal and personal struggles of identity and (be)longing.

Projection: Encounters with My Runaway Mother

Priscila Uppal
Toronto: Dundurn, 2013.

REVIEWED BY CAYO GAMBER

In her memoir, *Projection: Encounters with My Runaway Mother*, Priscila Uppal interrogates the autobiographical stories we are willing to tell others, and, ultimately, the personal stories we are willing to tell ourselves. From the outset, Uppal informs her readers that she “hated being the girl in school without a mother,” and that whenever possible, she wanted to ensure that no one should know that she “had a ‘runaway mother’: a mother who had abandoned her family without a trace.” At the age of 37, Uppal’s father drank contaminated water and became a quadriplegic. For almost six years, Uppal’s mother “cared” for her husband and two small children. Uppal recalls her mother’s violent rages – including when her mother threw her down the stairs along with her typewriter because Priscila had touched the typewriter without permission. She also remembers her mother shoving the tubing from her father’s urine bag down his throat. And then, when her brother Amjit was nine and Priscila was eight, her mother, Theresa, bought three tickets for Brazil. When the two children refused to go with her, Theresa left for Brazil on her own. Twenty years later, by accident, while running a web search for reviews of her work, Uppal runs across her mother’s website.

Given the evidence of her mother’s terrible rage against and subsequent abandonment of her family, I want to sympathize with Uppal; however, I find that I am conflicted in my response to this memoir because I do not fully understand her motivation in writing this narrative.

The memoir focuses on Uppal’s twelve-day visit with her mother. She informs us that “[e]ver since I was eighteen and had started writing seriously at university, I entertained the idea of embarking on a trip to find my runaway mother, and to write a book about the journey.” From the start, then, her journey, in large part, is about crafting a narrative of their encounter. In the last third of the text, she claims she is

willing to endure her [mother] for a book for all the other children of disastrous, neglectful, and narcissistic parents...., for those out there who reunite with lost mothers and fathers, dreams of reconciliation packed tenderly in their carry-ons, who land to the horrific discovery that they were better off without these parents, because the disappointing truth is that family reunions do not necessarily end in “newfound understanding, acceptance, and love.”

However, it isn't fully clear how reading about this failed reunion will benefit her readers.

Uppal pairs each chapter with a movie – a movie that becomes a place of projection for her, for her mother, or for both. What becomes clear, in the course of the memoir, is that what Uppal characterizes as the *Freaky Friday* genre will never come to characterize her relationship with her mother. She explains that in this genre, a young person and a mature adult temporarily switch bodies, and “once the body order is restored, satisfaction lies in the knowledge that parent and child have gained an understanding of each other's worlds. Father and son, mother and daughter, now love out of compassion rather than merely blood.” Conversely, Uppal discovers that “the woman who exists today is just as hateful, if not more so, than the woman of the past. And she could still not care less about me, or my brother, or my father for that matter...” Her mother's narcissism is such that Priscila observes that her mother “has not asked her estranged daughter more than two or three questions about her own life in five days of conversations,” that this “woman has no interest in any story other than the one she's constructed.”

However, Uppal also could be read as narcissistic. Throughout the memoir, she reminds us of her many accomplishments. For example, at one point, Priscila Uppal is taken aback when her “mother lists her accomplishments as a journalist (she is a ‘very famous journalist,’ an educator ‘of the highest order,’ with ‘well-respected friends’).” She adds that she is “horrified by the tirade of conceit.” Yet, she wonders if her mother thinks “I am just as successful, completing a Ph.D. in literature, having already landed a tenure-stream professorship at the third-largest Canadian university, two published books of poetry plus a novel.”

In addition, Uppal frequently notes that her mother is physically “repulsive,” “a fat woman”; “overweight ... in her loud formless clothes and bright red lipstick”; “her tacky clothing and bulky frame,” with “her frizzy hair, her bloated face, her clashing clothes and shuffling body.” However, these observations about her mother are not borne out in the photographs that accompany the memoir. At the end of her visit and her memoir, Priscila Uppal concludes: “I don't need a mother. And I no longer desire one. This doesn't

need to be a tragedy.” I want to applaud this ending, but I remain perplexed by this memoir because, ultimately, the story Uppal is willing to tell herself and her reader does not seem particularly incisive or successfully self-reflexive.

Fertile Ground: Exploring Reproduction in Canada

Paterson, Stephanie, Francesca Scala, and Marlene K. Sokolon.
Montreal: McGill-Queen University Press, 2014.

REVIEWED BY JEN RINALDI

In *Fertile Ground: Exploring Reproduction in Canada*, editors Stephanie Paterson, Francesca Scala, and Marlene K. Sokolon have collected works on the law, policy, and social infrastructure implicated in the regulation of Canadian reproductive activities. Built into the foundation of the collection is a challenge to the discursive shaping of reproductive activities within neo-liberal frameworks. While neo-liberal politics have made possible achievements like the striking down of prohibitive abortion laws or the provision of assistive reproductive technologies, the editors caution in their introduction: “with its emphasis on choice, rights, and responsibilities, neo-liberal discourse...[obscures] the discursive and structural contexts in which choices are made and responsibilities are assigned, negated, or performed” (14).

The chapters compiled under Part One collectively trouble the impossible neoliberal subject upon which reproduction regulations are predicated, by grounding the impact of these regulations in women’s experiences. Diana L. Gustafson and Marilyn Porter, and Candace Johnson contribute chapters that concentrate on the carrying out of reproductive decisions within intersectional, generational, and transversal contexts, suggesting that decision-making is inevitably and inextricably a socially embedded, politically informed activity. Co-editor Scala and Michelle Walks both write about the impact of reproductive technologies on queer and trans persons and single women, and the problems inherent in regulatory law and policy built on the assumption that families are heteronormative.

Part Two offers a more intensive focus on statutory and jurisprudential approaches to managing reproduction, beginning with Vanessa Gruben and Angela Cameron, and later Alana Cattapan reflecting upon the 2004 *Assisted*